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# “THANATOPSIS” IN THE NORTH AMERICAN REVIEW

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[The January issue of this REVIEW—the first to celebrate its centenary—reprinted “Thanatopsis” from the September, 1817, issue, because it marks the date of the beginning of American poetry. By a strange coincidence—for he naturally had no knowledge of our plans—Professor Phelps sent us this article in December, which arrived too late for the January issue.—THE EDITOR.]

BRYANT was nearly twenty-three years old when “Thanatopsis” was first printed in THE NORTH AMERICAN REVIEW. So much has been said about the astounding precocity of this poet, and so many errors have accumulated around the publication of his masterpiece, that it may be well to state the facts.

I have before me seven histories of American literature, each one by an authority. The first says the poem was written in 1816; the second, in 1811 or 1812; the third, in 1811; the fourth says it was published in 1816; the fifth says it was published in the poet’s twenty-first year; the sixth says it was written in the summer of 1811, when Bryant was sixteen, but elsewhere in the same volume we are told it was written when he was seventeen; the seventh—by the late T. W. Higginson—remarks, “His merely boyish poems . . . the ‘Thanatopsis,’ in particular, written at seventeen, have perhaps never been equaled in literature by any boy of that age.” Bryant himself said that he did not know when it was written.

“Thanatopsis” is a great poem, but it is unquestionably not a precocious poem; and the common supposition that it was a juvenile masterpiece is false. Many poets have produced greater poetry at an earlier age.

We know just two facts about this work. First, it was published when Bryant was almost twenty-three—not young for a poetic genius; second, that in its original published form in THE NORTH AMERICAN REVIEW it is not a remarkable poem.

It will be observed that the splendid peroration, beginning "So live," is not there at all:

So live, that when thy summons comes to join  
The innumerable caravan, that moves  
To the pale realms of shade, where each shall take  
His chamber in the silent halls of death,  
Thou go not, like the quarry-slave at night,  
Scourged to his dungeon, but sustain'd and sooth'd  
By an unfaltering trust, approach thy grave,  
Like one who wraps the drapery of his couch  
About him, and lies down to pleasant dreams.

—*From the edition of 1821, which also included for the first time eight lines that precede this paragraph.*

The equally splendid overture, "To him who in the love of nature," seventeen magnificent lines, is missing:

To him who in the love of Nature holds  
Communion with her visible forms, she speaks  
A various language; for his gayer hours  
She has a voice of gladness, and a smile  
And eloquence of beauty, and she glides  
Into his darker musings, with a mild  
And gentle sympathy, that steals away  
Their sharpness, ere he is aware. When thoughts  
Of the last bitter hour come like a blight  
Over thy spirit, and sad images  
Of the stern agony, and shroud, and pall,  
And breathless darkness, and the narrow house,  
Make thee to shudder, and grow sick at heart;—  
Go forth under the open sky, and list  
To Nature's teachings, while from all around—  
Earth and her waters, and the depths of air—  
Comes a still voice—

—*From the edition of 1821.*

And in its place we have four flat quatrains. Some of the best lines in the poem, "Old Ocean's gray and melancholy waste," are not present. In place of the lines, "The gay will laugh When thou art gone," we have the feeble, "The tittering world Dance to the grave."

It was in the 1821 edition of Bryant's poems, when the author was twenty-six or twenty-seven, that the work first appeared in its universally known form. Only a few minor changes were made after that date. This disposes of the gen-

erally accepted statement that "Thanatopsis" is a juvenile masterpiece.

Bryant was, however, a precocious poet, although his precocity is not displayed in his greatest work. One of the most extraordinary facts about his poetical career is that he actually published verse during the administration of Thomas Jefferson and during the administration of Rutherford B. Hayes. So long a period and so slender an output speak well for his fastidious taste. Shelley, Keats, and Bryant were born, respectively, in 1792, 1795, and 1794: Keats's poetical career lasted three years; Shelley's, twelve; and Bryant's, seventy! Keats published more original poetry than Bryant, and Shelley three times as much.

In the year 1808, at the age of thirteen, Bryant published his poem "The Embargo," a satire on the policy of Thomas Jefferson. The first edition was a pamphlet of twelve pages, of which only four or five copies are now known to exist. The late Mr. Hoe bought a copy for \$41.50, which was sold in April, 1911, for \$3,350. In 1912 the purchaser, Mr. Walter T. Wallace, bought another copy for \$3,000. "The Embargo" went into a second edition in 1809. From a copy of this in the Aldis collection in the Yale University library, I transcribe part of the "Advertisement":

A doubt having been intimated . . . whether a youth of thirteen years could have been the author of this poem . . . the friends of the writer feel obliged to certify the fact. . . . Mr. Bryant, the author, is a native of Cummington, in the county of Hampshire, and in the month of November last arrived at the age of fourteen years. The facts can be authenticated by many of the inhabitants of that place, as well as by several of his friends who give this notice; and if it be deemed worthy of further inquiry, the printer is enabled to disclose their names and places of residence.

*February, 1809.*

The cheek of the boyish Federalist is exhibited in the passage where he calls upon President Jefferson to resign.

Go, wretch, resign the presidential chair,  
Disclose thy secret measures, foul or fair.  
Go, search with curious eye, for hornèd frogs,  
Mid the wild wastes of Louisianian bogs;  
Or, where Ohio rolls his turbid stream,  
Dig for huge bones, thy glory and thy theme.

Roosevelt is not the only President who has been attacked for his prowess as a naturalist.

The lines about Belgium have a melancholy interest to-day:

Aspiring Belgia, once the patriot's pride,  
When barbarous Alva, her brave sons defied;  
The nurse of arts, th' advent'rous merchant's boast,  
Whose wide-spread commerce whiten'd every coast.  
Humbled, degraded, by the vilest arts,  
Beneath his iron scourge, succumbing smarts;  
The crowded city, the canal's green shore,  
Fair haunts of free-born opulence, no more!

"The Embargo" is more interesting to read than many poems of greater merit.

WILLIAM LYON PHELPS.